The Left's Quiet War on Arming Ukraine

How an argument born on the hard-left fringe made its way to your podcast feed -- and what Russia had to do with it.

Ask around on the left about sending weapons to Ukraine and you'll hear the same points come up over and over: NATO pushed Russia too far. Arms only prolong the war. The money should go to people at home. Peace talks, not tanks.

These views are often described as the work of a single pro-Kremlin machine. They aren't. But they aren't a coincidence either. They are the product of a loose, layered network -- parties, professors, podcasts, magazines and protest groups -- that has spent years building the case against arming Ukraine and pushing it out to ever wider audiences.

That network is worth mapping. Not to smear people, and not to pretend it's one big plot, but to understand how an idea travels: who writes it, who polishes it, who broadcasts it, and who turns it into a crowd in the street. That is Part One of this essay. But a fair map is just the problem statement -- and in Part Two, we'll see that the case this network makes collapses the moment you test it against the left's own values, against Russia's own record, and against what this war is really deciding.

Part One: The map

Let's be clear about what we're talking about. This is about opposition to **weapons for Ukraine** -- not just "NATO arms," since the objections go wider than what NATO members send.

One term needs explaining upfront: **campism**. It's the habit of seeing the world as a fight between two great blocs -- a U.S.-led Western camp and an "anti-imperialist" camp lined up against it. If you see the world that way, Russia's war looks less like a war of conquest and more like one camp pushing back against another. Campism is a real and important strand of this story, but it’s *not* a synonym for the whole left, and many of the people and groups below would reject the label. Pacifists, democratic socialists, "third-camp" socialists who refuse to pick either bloc, and hard-nosed

foreign-policy realists can all end up opposing arms shipments for very different reasons. Two people can reach the same conclusion from opposite premises. Keep that in mind.

The six layers

Think of the opposition as an ecosystem with six layers. Arguments tend to flow downward through it: born in ideological groups, carried into mass politics, given a scholarly gloss, pumped out through podcasts and magazines, and finally turned into marches. The flow is real -- but it is a set of pathways, not a chain of command.

Layer 1: The hard-left organizations. Groups like the World Socialist Web Site, the Revolutionary Communist International, and the Communist Party of Greece supply the core ideological frames. The Greek party is no marginal club: it won 7.7% of the vote and 21 parliamentary seats in 2023, and it has organized mass rallies and dockworker boycotts of arms shipments. Solidnet, an online network, links some 60 communist parties and spreads their shared positions. Their combined active base is perhaps 100,000 to 150,000 people worldwide -- small, but they punch above their weight because they write the script others borrow. That script runs roughly like this: Russia's invasion is wrong, *but* NATO expansion since 1991 and Western imperialism are the deeper cause, and sending arms only drags out the killing. Some frame it as a clash *between* imperialisms, in which neither Moscow nor NATO speaks for workers.

Layer 2: Democratic socialists. Here the argument gets a bigger stage. The Democratic Socialists of America claim 90,000–120,000 members and a presence in most U.S. cities; their majority position opposes arming Ukraine, and they carry real sway with younger progressives. In Germany, Die Linke took 8.8% of the vote -- 4.35 million ballots -- in the 2025 federal election while explicitly opposing arms to Ukraine and organizing large peace rallies. Spain's Podemos, Portugal's Left Bloc and Scandinavian left factions add smaller but real bases. These are mixed organizations, not campist fronts, but they translate anti-war arguments into elections, campuses and street politics. Call it 200,000–500,000 active members, with millions of sympathizers.

Layer 3: The academics. This is where the argument gets its suit and tie. John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago published "Why Ukraine Is the West's Fault" in *Foreign Affairs* back in 2014; the lecture version has 22 million YouTube views

-- five times more than any other video his university has ever posted. Harvard's Stephen Walt warns of escalation risks to hundreds of thousands of readers. Noam Chomsky brings decades of anti-imperialist fame and an audience in the millions. Former diplomat Chas Freeman argues for Ukrainian neutrality in policy circles. Crucially, these men are not necessarily leftists at all -- Mearsheimer arrives at his view through realist great-power theory, not Marxism. That matters, because it shows the same policy conclusion can come from wholly different worldviews. But it also means their arguments carry a credibility that activist slogans never could, and they get quoted everywhere.

Layer 4: The influencers. This is where the argument reaches millions. Glenn Greenwald has over 300,000 Substack subscribers and asks why U.S. billions go to Kyiv instead of Americans. Jimmy Dore's YouTube show reaches 1.2 million subscribers. Aaron Maté and Katie Halper's podcasts pull in hundreds of thousands of listeners a week. The Grayzone, run by Max Blumenthal and Maté, mixes investigative reporting with anti-interventionist framing. Add figures like Jackson Hinkle, Scott Ritter and Danny Haiphong, each with followings in the hundreds of thousands. These are the channels where young progressives, students and the politically curious actually live -- and they compete head-on with mainstream news.

Layer 5: The publications. Jacobin has 75,000 print subscribers and more than 3 million online visitors a month, and generally opposes arming Ukraine. Britain's Morning Star, a socialist daily with a print run of 10,000–14,000, draws millions of web visits a year. Left Voice, In Defense of Communism and the Solidnet network round out an alternative media sphere of perhaps 5 million monthly readers -- a self-reinforcing world in which the same arguments circulate, cite each other, and harden into common sense.

Layer 6: The street. Britain's Stop the War Coalition, founded in 2001, condemns Russia's invasion *and* opposes NATO expansion and further arms shipments -- a mix that shows how several strands can live inside one campaign. It is a genuinely broad coalition, rooted in Labour, Communist and far-left activism alike, and its politics can't be reduced to campism. Code Pink in the U.S. has tens of thousands of active members and millions of online supporters. Veterans for Peace adds the weight of former soldiers. These groups turn arguments into bodies in the street -- and attendance at a big march is not the same as membership, so their numbers should be read as mobilizing power, not a fixed audience.

The global backdrop

Beyond the organizations sits a separate fact: much of the world's governments won't arm Ukraine either. Brazil under Lula, most of Latin America, India, South Africa, much of Southeast Asia -- and the expanded BRICS bloc as a whole -- have refused, abstained, or stayed neutral despite Western pressure. That's important context, but it's a different category. A government's foreign policy is not a left-wing movement, and the size of the non-aligned world tells us little about who's persuading whom.

Where does Russia fit in?

Here is the part that demands the most care, because the evidence is real but easy to overstate.

Most of this ecosystem runs on its own steam. The people in it believe what they say, and many of them were saying it long before 2022. But there is also hard evidence that the Russian state has paid for, and boosted, specific pieces of the media landscape.

The Tenet Media case is the clearest example. In September 2024, the U.S. Justice Department charged two employees of RT, the Russian state broadcaster, with funneling $9.7 million to Tenet Media, a Tennessee company linked to right-wing influencers like Benny Johnson and Tim Pool. From October 2023 to August 2024, that money made up about 90% of Tenet's bank deposits. The Russians allegedly hid behind fake personas and shell companies. One unnamed commentator was paid $400,000 a month plus bonuses for roughly 130 videos; another got $100,000 per video. The influencers' millions of followers were never told where the money came from -- and according to the indictment, Tenet's founders admitted to each other in private messages that their investors "were, in truth and in fact, the Russians."

Then there's the softer form: the platform. RT and Sputnik have long given airtime to Western voices that echo Kremlin-friendly lines. Scott Ritter is a fixture on RT shows and says Russia is "on the right side of history." Jackson Hinkle appears regularly on Russian state TV. Jimmy Dore has gone on RT and repeated the debunked claim that Ukraine's 2014 revolution was a U.S.-backed coup. Glenn Greenwald's analysis runs on RT-linked outlets and tracks with Russian positions,

such as his prediction that Russia will keep Crimea and the "ethnic Russian" east. After Fox fired Tucker Carlson, RT offered him cooperation within days.

Other noteworthy faces on RT have included:

- Richard Wolff: American Marxist academic and economist, frequent contributor to RT America.
- Chris Hedges: American leftist journalist, formerly worked for The New York Times, later appeared on the now-defunct RT America.
- Ed Schultz: American talk show host, formerly worked for MSNBC, later appeared on the now-defunct RT America.
- Ted Rall: American political cartoonist, contributor to Sputnik News, and frequent guest on its radio program.
- George Galloway: Former British Member of Parliament, host of the program "SPUTNIK" on RT.
- Andrew Murray: Representative of the British trade union Unite, guest on Galloway's RT program.
- Nick Wright: British writer and commentator, guest on Galloway's RT program.
- Sevim Dağdelen: Member of the German Left Party (Die Linke), Member of the Bundestag, and regular interviewee on RT. She has criticized NATO as "belligerent" and called the pro-Western opposition in Ukraine "fascist."
- Daniel Martin Kovalik: American activist, lawyer, and political commentator, who wrote for RT claiming that "Russian intervention in Ukraine is in accordance with international law."
- Miloslav Ransdorf: Czech Communist Party Member of the European Parliament, who was once considered by Sputnik as a "reliable source of anti-Western rhetoric."

Of course, while direct, hidden funding is one thing, simply being platformed is not a crime. But an RT appearance is *amplification*: regardless of the extent to which speakers align (or don't) with Moscow, Russian state media is happy to put them on stage when this furthers Putin's cause. Neither fact proves that the wider anti-war left is run from the Kremlin.

Three levels of evidence should stay separate: documented funding or organizational ties; visible media amplification and shared talking points; and inference about actual influence. The first can prove a relationship. The second shows a pathway. Neither, alone, proves persuasion or secret coordination -- and anyone claiming the whole

ecosystem is Russian-directed needs evidence, organization by organization, that very likely does not exist.

What holds it together

Strip away the differences and four frames recur across the ecosystem:

1. **Anti-imperialism** -- NATO expansion and U.S. power, not Russian aggression, are the real problem.
2. **Anti-militarism** -- weapons cost lives and kill off the chance of a negotiated peace.
3. **Non-alignment** -- no country should be forced to pick a great-power camp.
4. **Sovereignty** -- Ukraine has a right to exist, but NATO membership and Western arms may undermine that sovereignty rather than defend it.

Different currents lean on different frames. A pacifist and a campist can march in the same demonstration for opposite reasons. The field is full of real disagreements -- between those who condemn Russia and those who excuse it, between those who back Ukrainian self-defense but not NATO, and those who oppose the war effort outright.

So that is the map: not one movement with one master, but a crowded, quarrelling, well-networked field that has already shaped how millions of people on the left understand this war.

But a map is not a verdict. Mapping this ecosystem fairly -- refusing to call it a Kremlin plot -- does not oblige us to call it justified. In fact, once you lay the opposition's four core frames side by side, something becomes hard to unsee: every one of them fails. Not tactically. Not rhetorically. Morally. Here is why.

Part Two: Why the opposition is wrong

1. Solidarity that stops at the border

The international left has one idea it claims as its deepest: solidarity. Workers of the world, unite. An injury to one is an injury to all. The whole tradition rests on the belief that when working people are under attack, your side is chosen for you -- you stand with them, not with the abstractions over their heads.

So ask the obvious question: what do Ukraine's own workers want?

They are not hard to find. Ukraine's trade unions, its miners and rail workers, its nurses and teachers, and -- pointedly -- its own socialists, feminists and anarchists have said the same thing since February 2022, in statement after statement: *send weapons*. The Ukrainian left, the people who spent years fighting oligarchs and austerity and who despise NATO as much as any DSA member, have begged their Western comrades not to confuse "anti-war" with "anti-resistance." They ask for arms the way the Spanish Republic asked for arms in 1936 -- and they remember what the world's refusal meant then.

Opposing arms to Ukraine is a failure of internationalism in the plainest sense: it overrides the stated will of the people actually being bombed, in favor of the theories of people who are not. A solidarity that applies only when the victims' survival strategy matches your foreign-policy framework is not solidarity. It is audience selection. The left that would never dream of telling Palestinians to stop resisting tells Ukrainians exactly that -- and calls it peace.

And the pacifist version fails on its own terms. Arms, we are told, "prolong the war." This is dishonest framing. Denying arms does not shorten wars; it shortens *resistance*. The choice on the table was never war or no war. It was a defended Ukraine or an undefended one. A quick conquest is not peace -- ask Bucha, ask Mariupol, ask the filtration camps and the kidnapped children. It is simply violence the cameras stop filming.

2. The empire the left refuses to see

The anti-imperialist frame has a hole in it the size of Russia.

Listen to the opposition's story and you will hear, in great detail, about NATO expansion, the 2014 Maidan "coup," Western arms, Western money, Western hypocrisy. What you will almost never hear about is Russia itself -- its own motives, its own history, its own stated aims. The largest country on earth, which has spent three centuries absorbing its neighbors, somehow appears in this analysis as a pure reactor: a bear poked, a power "provoked," an object of Western policy rather than a subject in its own right.

This is a failure of imagination that the post-Soviet world finds staggering -- because Eastern Europeans, Balts, Poles, Georgians, Chechens, Kazakhs and Ukrainians know Russian imperialism the way only its former subjects can. They don't need a theory. They have the graves.

The record is not ambiguous. Russia leveled Grozny twice to keep Chechnya. It carved chunks out of Georgia in 2008 and never gave them back. It seized Crimea in 2014 and lit a war in the Donbas that burned for eight years. It has propped up a client tyranny in Belarus, kept troops in Moldova against that country's will, and turned Syria into a bombing range. And it has told us why, in plain text. In July 2021, Vladimir Putin published a long essay arguing that Ukrainians are not a real nation -- that Ukraine is, historically, Russia. His state media and officials say versions of this weekly. A state that denies your nation exists, invades you, and annexes your land is not "reacting to NATO." It is doing what empires do, and saying so out loud.

Here is the irony: the left has spent 50 years learning to see the world through post-colonial eyes -- to centre the experience of colonized peoples, to distrust the colonizer's claim that he was "provoked." Ukrainian intellectuals have been making exactly this argument about Russia for decades, joined by their peers from Tallinn to Tbilisi. The Western left, which claims to listen to the Global South, plugs its ears when the colonized people speak Russian (never asking how they came to learn it in the first place). Its anti-imperialism has one imperial blank spot, and it happens to be the empire currently committing the aggression.

3. The condonation nobody intended

At this point a reader will object: *I condemn Russia's invasion. I just also oppose NATO escalation. That doesn't make me pro-Russian.*

Fair enough -- as a statement about your heart. But politics is not judged by the heart. It is judged by effect. And here is the uncomfortable arithmetic: in a war between an invader who has plenty of weapons and a defender who depends on outside supply, **"stop the supply" is a demand that falls on one side only**. Russia needs no one's permission to keep fighting; its arsenal is its own, even supplemented as it is by unopposed arms supplies from Iran and North Korea. The only army in this war that your position can actually disarm is Ukraine's. A ceasefire on Russian terms -- which is what an arms cutoff produces -- means Russia keeps what it stole, rests,

rearms, and returns, as it returned to Chechnya in 1999, to Georgia in 2008, to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Every "but" after "I condemn the invasion" quietly cancels the words before it.

This is what people mean when they say such a position is "objectively pro-Russian," and the phrase, though clumsy, points at something real. You need not love Putin to do his work. If your magazine covers, your podcast guests, your marches and your resolutions all press the one demand that Moscow also presses -- no arms for Ukraine -- while your demand on Russia is a heartfelt plea, then the practical content of your politics is the condonation of Russian imperialism, whatever your intent. The road to the Kremlin's preferred outcome is paved with good intentions, and much of it was laid by people who sincerely believe they are anti-war.

Intent matters for judging persons. Effect matters for judging politics. By the standard the left applies to everyone else -- *don't tell me your values, show me the consequences of your decisions* -- the anti-arming position fails.

4. What happens when borders become suggestions

This is the biggest failure, and the least discussed: what this war is actually deciding.

Following two world wars, a foundational rule was crystallized in the UN Charter: **states may not change borders by force.** It was the rule that kept Europe's borders stable for seventy-five years, the rule that made small countries viable, the rule that let decolonized nations exist without keeping a million men under arms. It has been violated before, and hypocritically -- the left knows the list by heart. But no violation has been as large, as open, or as consequential as Russia's attempt to erase a UN member state of 40 million people and absorb its territory by decree.

Rules like this survive on deterrence, and deterrence is decided by audiences. Nations large and small are watching. So is every acquisitive power with a grievance, a "historical claim," and a map it would like to redraw. If Russia is made to fail -- if conquest demonstrably costs more than it gains -- the rule holds for another generation, and perhaps Taiwan's strait stays quiet, and Moldova and Georgia and the Baltics sleep easier. If Russia wins even a ratified half-victory, the lesson lands in every general staff on earth: *the era of land grabs is open again; the only law is military violence.* A world like that is not a world with less war. It is a world of endless war,

fought mostly by the poor, mostly in small countries -- the very people the left claims to defend.

And there is a darker corollary. In 1994, Ukraine gave up the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal in exchange for signed security assurances from Russia, the United States and Britain. Russia's reward for that disarmament was invasion; the West's reward was two decades of dithering. Every state watching -- Iran, South Korea, Japan, Poland, Saudi Arabia -- has done the math: *guarantees are paper; warheads are steel.* Refusing to arm Ukraine is not a vote for peace. It is a billboard ad for nuclear proliferation.

The bottom line

None of this requires loving NATO or trusting Washington an inch. You can hold every one of the left's critiques of American power -- most of them are true -- and still see this war straight. A Ukrainian soldier in a trench is not a NATO policy. She is a citizen defending her home against an army sent by a man who says her country shouldn't exist. The anti-imperialist tradition, honestly applied, is on her side. Solidarity, honestly applied, is on her side. The UN Charter, the memory of Spain in 1936, and the future peace of every small nation on earth are on her side.

The network mapped in Part One has real people in it, mostly making arguments in good faith, arriving at their positions from real traditions. But the position itself -- stop the arms, freeze the war, let the map stand where the tanks stopped -- fails morally, fails the left's own test of solidarity, fails to see the only empire actually on the march, condones what it claims to condemn, and invites the next dozen wars even as it protests this one.

The left once knew how to tell the difference between opposing war and opposing resistance. It is time to remember.

Part One of this essay is adapted from a research report mapping left-wing opposition to weapons provision for Ukraine. All figures are the report's estimates; audience and membership counts change over time and often overlap. Sources include the U.S. Department of Justice (September 2024 indictment), the McGill Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy's Tenet Media incident report, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, and the organizations' own published materials.